

6-26-2019

Traveling Always Presents the Opportunity to Encounter the Unexpected

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STARS Citation

Wang, Alvin, "Traveling Always Presents the Opportunity to Encounter the Unexpected" (2019). *UCF Forum*. 360.

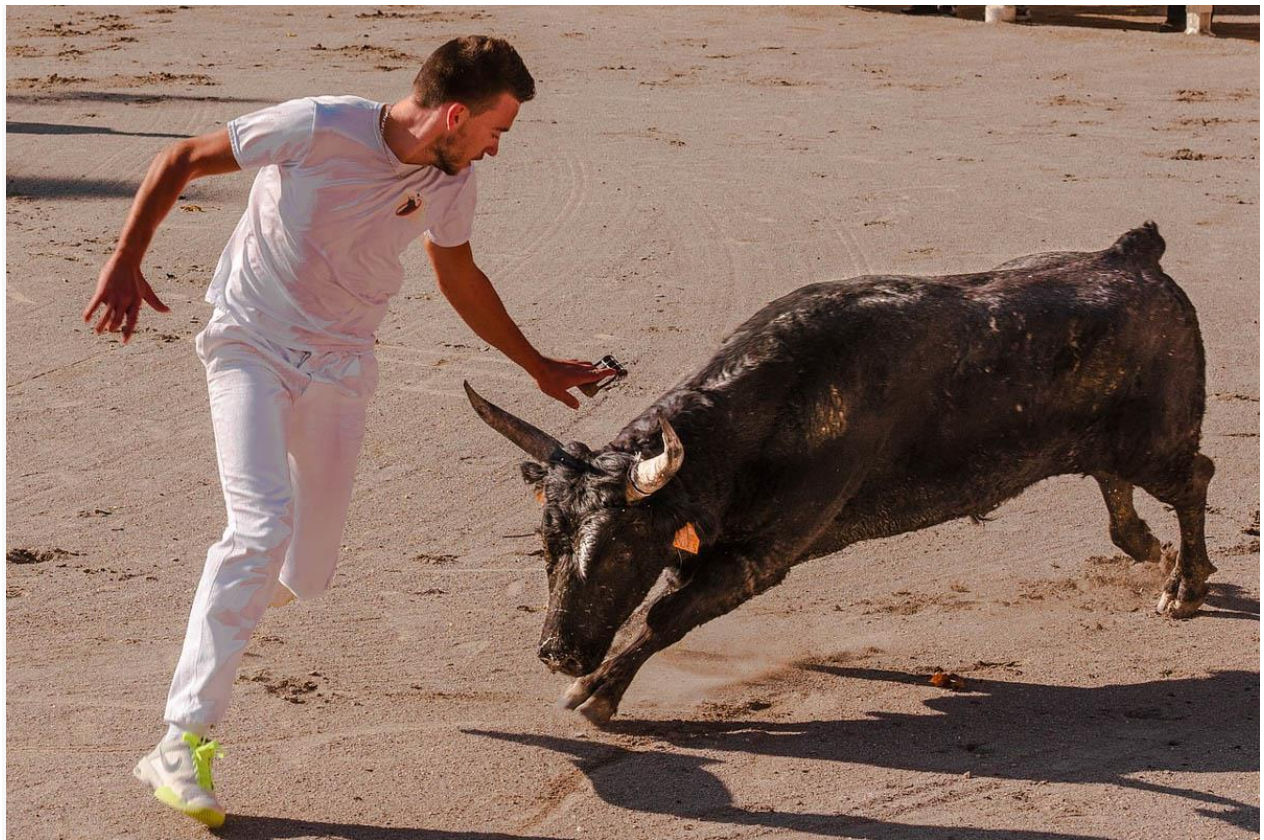
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Traveling Always Presents the Opportunity to Encounter the Unexpected

By Alvin Wang
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, June 26, 2019



I first encountered the cultural phenomenon of *toro piscine* when my wife and I read journalist and screenwriter Calvin Trilling's travelogue *Travels with Alice*. While traveling in Provence, France, Trilling and his family stumbled upon the so-named event that translates into "bull swimming pool."

The Trillings learned that *toro piscine* is a competition in which the players (always young men) must somehow entice a bull into a swimming pool. It is never clear whether the competition is between men or whether this is a contest between man and beast.

Nor is it evident why anyone would want to play such a game involving a large, horned animal. It was irrational to our way of thinking.

I mentioned this oddity to a Francophile friend who, despite living in France for several years, never heard of anything that associated bulls with swimming pools. She was just as incredulous as I so we both agreed that Trilling's account of *toro piscine* was thoroughly tongue-in-cheek. In other words: a lot of bull.

Several years later we found ourselves visiting Arles, a picturesque city in Provence. Similar to Trilling's account, I was driving a rental car with my wife and young daughter. I think our car was a Citroen—that funny looking car that never made any sense to Americans, yet displayed that French flair for appealing to the irrational. After all, this is the country that bestowed upon Jerry Lewis the *National Order of the Legion of Honour*. Subsequently, we would discover that this country also gave us the inexplicable *toro piscine*.

We were driving through downtown Arles when my wife jumped out of her seat and yelled *toro piscine!* Incredibly, while gazing out the car window she saw a poster with those very words emblazoned at the top. I attributed her “vision” to a lack of sleep and an encounter with *Le Cheval Blanc* the night before. But she insisted and because no one else saw the poster we were required to double back so that we all could witness an advertisement for cultural irrationality. Doubling back is not easy when you are driving in a historic city where the original urban planners were ancient Romans.

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It was to take place in the wonderfully restored Roman amphitheater in the city center. *Magnifique!*

Built in the 1st century, it had 120 arches and could seat 20,000 spectators. In fact, *les Arènes d'Arles* is so large that you could fit a football field within its walls.

Later that evening, we walked up to the brightly lit amphitheater. It was already night and judging by the noise there were a lot of people inside. From our street-level vantage point we could peer through the arches and see that the floor of the ancient stadium was covered in pale yellow sand. Because the street was higher than the stadium floor we could only see the periphery and not the center of the amphitheater. We walked around the structure and always had the same view. Then we came upon an arch that revealed the edges of—a swimming pool! Its walls appeared to be about two feet high and it was filled with pristine blue water that shimmered under the bright lights.

We stared at the corner of the pool for several minutes. Suddenly a roar erupted from the crowd and with our limited view through the top of the arch we saw the legs and feet of a running man. He was wearing white pants. Moments later we saw the legs of a bull kicking up sand while it ran in pursuit of the man. We waited some more and then saw the man running in the opposite direction followed quickly by the bull. We observed

several instances of this, but only saw the legs of the man and beast. I started laughing in disbelief. It was like watching the *Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner* cartoon show with the top part of the television screen cut off.

After several years, that summer evening in Arles still remains mysterious to us. Did it really happen? Would any of our friends back home believe us? We didn't even have photos to back up our claims. However, I can state with some certainty that the bull was chasing the man (men?) in white pants and not the other way around.

Also, we never witnessed the bull or man enter the swimming pool. But we did not stay until the end, so it is possible that there may have been some splashing around by the conclusion of this particular toro piscine.

It is true that my family and I never made it into the stadium event, but decided on this occasion to maintain our status as "outside" observers. We have no regrets.

Because of our decision, toro piscine for us is both a real event and something that could only have been imagined. This is why that evening in Arles embodies the transformative nature of traveling: To encounter the unexpected. To learn about the perspectives and tastes of other cultures. To discover realities that one never could have imagined.

And if one is lucky, to experience the delicious magic that occurs at the boundary of the real and the imagined.

Alvin Wang resumed his role as a professor in the University of Central Florida's Department of Psychology this year after serving 11 years as dean of the Burnett Honors College. He can be reached at Alvin.Wang@ucf.edu.